

A Conversation Analytic Study of *Right* as a Response Particle in US English

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Lee, Seoyoung. 2024. A conversation analytic study of *right* as a response particle in US English. *SNU Working Papers in English Language and Linguistics* 20, 43-61. The present study is a conversation analytic (CA) investigation of the response particle 'right' in US English. I performed sequential analysis of US English conversations in the CallHome and CallFriend datasets in the TalkBank database. The analysis revealed that the token 'right' may be used as a second pair part, in post-expansion, and as a telling receipt, and may display varying degrees of the speaker's epistemic access. Especially worth noting is that 'right' can be employed by a speaker at an epistemic inferiority in US English, contrary to the extant claim that such a usage is characteristic of UK English. I thus conclude that 'right' in US English is a versatile response particle whose usage is not fixed to a specific sequential position or epistemic stance. (Seoul National University)

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1. Introduction

One of the defining characteristics of conversation analysis (CA) is that it understands context as dynamic, with each utterance and action being simultaneously context-Shaped and context-renewing (Drew and Heritage 1992). This enables a richer and more accurate understanding of real-life linguistic interaction, and one area in which many discoveries have been made in the CA tradition concerns response particles such as 'yeah', 'uh huh', and 'mm hmm'. Schegloff (1982) analyzes transcriptions of actual conversations to identify several functions that these particles serve in interactions. While formal semantics, for example, may stipulate the fixed meaning of such particles in the lexicon, a CA approach allows us to discern the specific ways these particles are used.

Schegloff (1982) does not make distinctions between particles in their usages, however, and this task is picked up by other researchers using the CA framework. Jefferson (1993), for example, points out a contrast between ‘yeah’ and ‘uh huh’ or ‘mm hmm’. Her data analysis indicates that the former frequently signals speakership incipency, while the latter are prototypical continuers encouraging the other participant to continue talking. Similar studies have been conducted that have furthered our understanding of how different response particles are used in different contexts.

It is rather surprising, then, that not many CA studies have focused on the usage of the response particle ‘right’. Bolden et al. (2023) is one of the few studies that have. They point out this relative lack of academic attention to ‘right’, in spite of its being one of the most common response particles in spoken English (McCarthy, 2002; O’Keeffe and Adolphs, 2008). The paper then sets out to identify the difference in usage of ‘right’ in US and UK English, performing sequential analysis over collections of ‘right’ produced from American and British corpora. Four distinct usages, two for each dialect, are identified, which are summarized below.

The first distinction that Bolden et al. (2023) makes about the usages of ‘right’ in US and UK English is that they differ in terms of sequential position. Namely, ‘right’ occurs as a second pair part in US English, while it occurs in post-expansion (‘third position’ in the authors’ terminology) in UK English. In the former, ‘right’ serves as a confirming response to a confirmation request. In the latter, ‘right’ registers the new information that the speaker requested in the first pair part, and which was provided in the preceding second pair part. By investigating the sequential position that ‘right’ occupies in US and UK English in this way, the authors provide an empirical ground for claiming that ‘right’ signals different levels of epistemic access in US and UK English.

The second distinction made in Bolden et al. (2023) is that when ‘right’ is used as a telling receipt, it aligns in different ways with the telling activity in progress in US and UK English. Specifically, when ‘right’ is used as a telling receipt in US English, it claims epistemic access of the speaker and consequently has the effect of curtailing the telling activity, since repeating already-known information would be unnecessary. In UK English, on the other hand, ‘right’ as a telling receipt functions as a continuer, signaling the dominant speaker to continue the telling activity. The usages of ‘right’ thus differ in the two dialects in terms of alignment with telling activity as well, and this difference is also related to degree of epistemic access as was the case above.

All in all, Bolden et al. (2023) claims that a major characteristic of the particle ‘right’ in US English which distinguishes it from UK English is that it signals the epistemic access, or even authority, of the speaker about the matter at hand. Some preliminary examination of North American telephone conversation data, however, revealed that such dichotomy may not be as clear-cut as the authors make it out to be:

Extract 1: CallHome 4104 (9:06-9:26)

- 01 B: The only problem will be the ticket to get to
 02 London. but I'll uh see if we can get a one
 03 way. (0.6) and then buy another one way goin'
 04 back.
 05 A: Where's this ticket >this ticket is to
 06 Milan?<
 07 B: Uh no get it to Nice, from London to Nice.
 08 A: **Right.**
 09 (0.8)
 10 B: Right.

The above excerpt is taken from a sequence in which speakers A and B are organizing plane trips, and B is in epistemic superiority regarding the itinerary as is evidenced by B's explanation to A in lines 01-04. Speaker A initiates a question-answer sequence in lines 05-06, asking where the plane is headed to. After B's relevant second pair part in line 07, which provides the requested information, A utters ‘right’ as a post-expansion signaling new information receipt in line 08. As will be further elaborated in the ‘Data and Method’ section, the above excerpt is taken from a conversation between two speakers of US English. Contrary to what Bolden et al. (2023) suggest, we can see that ‘right’ has been uttered by a speaker without epistemic certainty.

Motivated by this apparent counter-example to the claim made in Bolden et al. (2023), I aim to analyze how the response particle ‘right’ is used in US English and identify the various usages in finer detail. Through an in-depth data analysis, usages of ‘right’ that were not mentioned in previous studies may be uncovered.

2. Data and method

The data used in this paper are excerpted from the CallHome and CallFriend datasets in the TalkBank database. Both datasets consist of unscripted, 30-minute-long telephone conversations between native speakers of North American English, with all calls originating in North America (US and Canada). The CallFriend dataset is further divided into Northern US Corpus and Southern US Corpus, depending on the native dialect of the speakers. A total of 25 segments from eight different conversations in the datasets were analyzed for this study. Excerpts in the present paper are chosen among these segments for their representativeness of the major claims made in this paper. All of the data used in this study are publicly available on the TalkBank website.

Following the CA approach to the study of response particles, I created collections of standalone ‘right’s and examined each instance in terms of sequential position and alignment with the ongoing speech activity. Given the previous work on ‘right’, I analyzed these factors in relation to the epistemic status of the participants. Though such an analysis, I found out that US English speakers’ usages of ‘right’ are not limited to situations where they have epistemic superiority. I was also able to identify usages of ‘right’ unmentioned in Bolden et al. (2023). This is shown in more detail below.

3. Findings

The instances of ‘right’ that I analyzed for the present study are classified as follows in terms of sequential position: those where ‘right’ occurs in second pair part, those where ‘right’ occurs in post-expansion (third position), and those where ‘right’ is used as a receipt within a telling activity. For each sequential position, I further classified the instances in terms of the epistemic status expressed by the speaker of ‘right’. ‘Right’ in second pair part may be used to confirm “my side” information, confirm new information receipt, or confirm shared knowledge. When it occurs in post-expansion, ‘right’ chiefly serves to register information requested in the relevant first pair part. Finally, ‘right’ as a telling receipt can either display the speaker’s epistemic access to the topic discussed in the telling sequence, or signal the informativeness of the telling. The former typically curtails the telling, as further elaboration would contribute little to the shared knowledge between participants. The latter, acknowledging

the informational content of the telling activity, typically warrants the continuation of the telling.

3.1. 'Right' in second pair part

3.1.1. *Confirmation of "my side" information*

As was noted in Bolden et al. (2023), the response particle 'right', appearing as an answer to a question, can be used to confirm the information that the speaker has greater authority over than the other participant. The following excerpt exemplifies this usage:

Extract 2: CallFriend 4504 (1:53-1:55)

01 EPH: (0.5) Oh it's no problem, just her's going to

02 be there;

03 SON: Wha::↑

04 EPH: Just she's going to be there;

05 SON: **Right**,

The excerpt is taken from a conversation in which SON is informing his father EPH about how he will catch a ride home. EPH poses a confirmation question regarding who else will be riding in the same car in the form of a rising declarative in lines 01-02. This is followed by a repair sequence in lines 03-04. Line 04 is a repetition of the same question asked in line 01, with only a minor change in the wording, and SON provides the relevant second pair part in line 05 when he utters 'right'. This token of 'right' in line 05 in the extract above signals confirmation on SON's part about information that he has greater access to than does EPH. This is supported by both the larger context that SON is the one informing EPH, and the nature of a question-answer sequence.

3.1.2. *Confirmation of new information receipt*

Bolden et al. (2023) associated 'right' as a second pair part to a question with confirmation of the speaker's "my side" information. Data collected in the present study, however, indicate that it can also be used to confirm that the speaker has received and understood new information provided by the other interactant. This is exemplified in the excerpt below.

Extract 3: CallHome 4247 (2:42-3:34)

01 A: yah I was just gonna say Clinton just came out

- 02 yesterday with his uh his statement concerning
 03 affirmative action↑
- 04 B: uhhuh↑
- 05 A: And, 'n basically he has in the past said that
 06 he was not in favor of uh. you know of making
 07 um al- allowances strictly based on race. but
 08 at the same time, uh the analysis in the
 09 news. ((breath)) shall we say the conservative
 10 analysis in the news is that. Clinton just
 11 came out and said that he (.)doesn't believe
 12 (.) in quota systems. and in reverse
 13 discrimination but that he does believe that
 14 affirmative action is necessary ((inhale)) to
 15 move (.) uh yih know black Americans((inhale))
 16 forward and tuh give them the >opportunities
 17 that they've been denied.< So he's tryin tuh,
 18 k- kind of walking a tight rope yih know wut
 19 I'm saying?
- 20 B: **Right,**
- 21 A: In other words ((breath)) [1- .
- 22 B: [He's] trying to
 23 please everybody.
- 24 A: yeah hh let's see if we can make everybody
 25 happy! ((laugh))

This excerpt is from a conversation that takes place between speaker A, a US resident who is within the US at the time of talking, and speaker B, who is from the US but has stayed abroad in recent years and is presently in Russia. Just before the excerpted dialogue, speaker B asks for some news headlines from the US, and this is the context in which speaker A brings up Clinton's statement on affirmative action in lines 01-03. B responds to the topic proffer in lines 01-03 with the continuer “uhhuh”, encouraging A to go on.

A's explanation of the situation ensues in lines 05-19, in which he establishes the conflict that Clinton faces, where he is wary of reverse discrimination on the one hand (lines 11-13), but is essentially trying to give black Americans more opportunities based on their race on the other (lines 14-17). He summarizes the situation with the metaphor “walking a tight rope” and seeks confirmation that B understood his point with “yih know wut I'm saying?” in lines 18-19. B's utterance of 'right' in line 20 gives this confirmation. This is strengthened by her paraphrase (“He's trying to please everybody”) in lines 22-23 that A

acknowledges as adequate in lines 24-25. The response particle 'right' in this context thus signals that B has gained understanding of the matter at hand as a result of A's telling activity in lines 05-19.

Superficial similarities can be found between Excerpt 2 in the previous section and Excerpt 3 above: in both, 'right' is an affirmative response to a question in the form of a rising declarative. One may argue that 'right' in Excerpt 3 is also an instance of confirmation of "my side" information, namely, whether speaker B understands speaker A's point. However, because "yih know wut I'm saying?" is a question about the knowledge state (meta-knowledge) of the hearer, rather than facts about the real world, it essentially functions as a comprehension check. The instance of 'right' in Excerpt 3, in turn, signals comprehension rather than information provision. While the instances of 'right' in Excerpts 2 and 3 may be similar in terms of sequential position, they are distinguished in the epistemic stance that they display.

3.1.3. *Confirmation of shared information*

In 3.1.1, we saw how 'right' as an answer to a question can be used to confirm the speaker's "my side" information. In 3.1.2, we saw an instance of 'right' being deployed to signal comprehension of information provided by the other participant. In both cases, there is an asymmetry of information between the two participants prior to the exchange, and 'right' signals either the giving or the receiving of information. Some instances of 'right' occurring in the second pair part, however, do not pertain to the conferring of information but rather confirm that the same background knowledge is shared between participants. This is shown in the example below.

Extract 4: CallFriend 4889 (23:00-23:24)

01 F2: I'm also getting, (.) and this I a:m getting

02 new, hhh [o(ne)] (.) o:ne,

03 F1: [w-]

04 F2: (0.8) one for my carseat to snap into,

05 (1.2)

06 F2: they have that no:w,

07 F1: wha d'you mean?

08 F2: (0.4) they uh (.) y- you sna:p your car seat

09 into a fra:me?

10 F1: hhh oh yeah I've seen it Century makes it,

11 tha's very [cu:te]

- 12 F2: [so:] yea:h!
 13 F1: >like if you're< sho:pping or so:methi:ng,
 14 F2: yeah it's very convenient for going in the
 15 ca:r on sh(opping) on errands, yih know,
 16 not↑
 17 (0.4)
 18 F1: Ri:ght,
 19 F2: not for like really good s:tro:lls [but it's
 20 great for li:ke,] yih kno:w! =
 21 F1: [not on Yom Tov `or wutever,`]
 22 F2: =if you want to go to the ma:ll, hh or, hhh
 23 you [kno:w].
 24 F1: [uhhuh]

F2 proffers a topic in lines 01-02, regarding an object she will buy, which runs into problems due to apparent incomprehension on F1's part. At the transition-relevant place (TRP) at the end of line 04, where F1 would be expected to react to the topic proffer, a 1.2 second pause ensues instead. F1 initiates repair by uttering "wha d'you mean" in line 07, and F2 gives a more concrete description of the object she is talking about. F1 expresses her consequent comprehension in line 10 with "oh yeah", and gives details about the object's maker and appearance as proof that she is indeed acquainted with it.

When F2 stops abruptly in the middle of a turn construction unit (TCU) while discussing the product's usage in line 16, leading to the 0.4 second pause in line 17, F1 confirms that she is on the same page with F2 about it with "Ri:ght" in line 18. Because F2 stops her utterance only one syllable after a potential TRP (after "yih know"), F1 seems to have interpreted F2's utterance in lines 14-16 to be a confirmation-seeking first pair part. Shortly after the confirming 'right' in line 18, F1 continues with her own elaboration of the purposes of the product, stating that it is not suitable for Yom Tov (a term for Jewish holidays) in line 21. This elaboration, similarly to the detail that F1 provided in lines 10-11, again signals to F2 that F1 has sufficient background information on the matter at hand to follow the conversation. This has importance in the present context, as there had been confusion about the topic in the first seven lines. F1's 'right' in line 18 signaling adequate level of information thus enables the conversation to go on smoothly.

To sum up, 'right' appearing in second pair part can not only signal either confirmation of information that the speaker has significantly more access to

than the other party or receipt of new information just provided in a previous turn, but also signal that the speaker's understanding of the matter at hand is compatible with that of the other participant. We can thus see that the same token 'right' in similar sequential positions can serve different functions in terms of the epistemic stance of the speaker in relation to that of the other interactant.

3.2. 'Right' in post-expansion: registering requested information

Extract 1 in the Introduction showed one instance of 'right' used in post-expansion, or third position, to signal that the speaker has registered the information requested in the first pair part. The following example illustrates a similar point:

Extract 5: CallHome 4247 (9:24-9:52)

- 01 B: Do they have any scholarships for foreign
 02 students?
 03 A: I- I'm- I've never heard of a scholarship for
 04 an English language program personally (.) but
 05 I think=
 06 B: =We never did either but I keep thinking I'm
 07 going to find one of these days ((laugh))
 08 A: yea:h, I know. I'm sure that they pro-
 09 ((breath)) You know I e- the question of
 10 whether they have scholarships for
 11 international students u::m. for the regular
 12 program is a good one, n I'd like to find
 13 out, I'd like to think that they do, and, and
 14 I [think]
 15 B: [uhhuh.]
 16 A: they might. but I don't know yet.
 17 (1.1)
 18 B: Right.

Speaker B poses a question regarding the availability of scholarships for foreign students in lines 01-02, making relevant a second pair part in which speaker A provides an answer to it. This answer comes in lines 14 and 16, which is that it is a possibility, but speaker A does not know for certain yet. B signals the receipt of this answer with 'right' in line 18. The 1.1 second pause before it in line 17 may be due to the fact that speaker A's answer had insufficient amount

of information: it conveyed the information on speaker A's uncertain epistemic stance, thus failing to determine whether such scholarships exist. Because A's second pair part in lines 14 and 16 completed the form of the question-answer sequence, a post-expansion can follow naturally. It is delayed, however, implying dispreference, likely due to unsatisfactory information content of the second pair part. Nevertheless, B's 'right' in line 18 signals that B has registered the information A provided, partial as it may be, on B's request in lines 01-02.

3.3. 'Right' as telling receipt

3.3.1. *Forwarding telling activity*

Bolden et al. (2023) identifies usages of 'right' in UK English where it forwards the telling activity by acknowledging the previous utterance as meaningful. This usage is also seen in North American English data, as seen below:

Extract 6: CallHome 4104 (2:21-2:36)

01 **A:** So you might not come back here.

02 (0.9)

03 **B:** Ri:ght.

04 **A:** Gotcha.

05 **B:** See I'm only be there for like three or four
06 days.

07 (0.8)

08 **A:** **Right.**

09 **B:** So I mean if it's going to cost me an arm and
10 a leg it's cheaper if I just stay here.

11 **A:** Right. So you don't [nee-

12 **B:** [Because] I don't have to do
13 anything but work that day [°so.

14 **A:** [Right.] Well wut

15 happens to your work then?

This extract is part of a conversation in which speakers A and B discuss B's schedule. A asks B if he is not coming back to where A is in line 01, which B confirms in line 03. After A's post-expansion conveying information receipt in line 04, B goes on to explain why he is not coming back. In lines 05-06, B first mentions that the duration of his stay would be short. The 0.8 second pause in the next line shows that A is waiting for B to continue. When B does not continue speaking, A utters 'right' in line 08. This signals that she is

acknowledging the piece of information provided in lines 05-06 as informative and relevant, and that she is giving B license to elaborate.

Bolden et al. (2023) state that such usage of ‘right’ relates to its use as a third position receipt in its information-registering capacity. This observation fits the present example as well, considering how in her turn previous to the ‘right’ in line 08, A uttered a post-expansion registering information. The question-answer sequence begun in line 01 is concluded by the time we get to the ‘right’ in line 08, but A is still in a position where she is receiving information from B and registering it.

The tokens of ‘right’ in lines 03, 11 and 14 are deliberately not highlighted because they belong to different usages: the one in line 03 is a confirmation of information on the speaker’s side discussed in Section 3.1.1 above; the ones in lines 11 and 14 are also telling receipts but they disalign with the current telling activity. More discussion on the latter two will take place in Section 3.3.2 below.

The following is another extract exemplifying the use of ‘right’ as a continuer that registers information provided in a telling sequence.

Extract 7: CallFriend 4504 (1:54-2:18; continuation of Extract 2)

- 01 EPH: Just she's going to be there;
- 02 SON: Right, (0.3)
- 03 EPH: ↑Okay so you put episs a >[bag] in the
- 04 middle< then that's all,
- 05 SON: [oh] uh- uh- I know
- 06 there's gonna be sm other people in the
- 07 front, (0.5) but (0.5) and then (.)and I
- 08 asked him, Esther asked if I could pick if he
- 09 could pick her up,
- 10 EPH: Yeah:↑
- 11 SON: hhh So he said he could pick her up if she
- 12 she waits like (.) on the road wherever↑
- 13 (0.5)
- 14 EPH: Uh hu:h,
- 15 SON: an:d then she could sit, in between the girl
- 16 and me.
- 17 (0.4)
- 18 EPH: Right,
- 19 (0.9)
- 20 EPH: Uh huh↓ (0.6) ((distortion)) [I don't know

- 21 how]
 22 SON: [well I have to call Esther] now

This excerpt is an extension of Excerpt 2, in which SON is informing EPH about how he will catch a ride home. Regarding the situation of having to share a ride home with a girl, EPH suggests putting a bag between SON and the girl during the ride in lines 03-04. SON's response from line 05 to line 16 explains why that may be impossible to do: another girl may have to sit between the two (lines 15-16). SON's explanation is interspersed with EPH's utterance of continuers, as seen in lines 10 and 14. This indicates that EPH understands the present speech activity as a telling activity in which SON is the dominant speaker informing EPH. EPH's utterance of 'right' in line 18 is designed as a similar continuer, which is evidenced by the fact that a 0.9 second pause follows it as EPH waits for SON to go on. When nothing comes forth, contrary to expectation, EPH finally utters "Uh huh" with a falling intonation to signal that he registered SON's utterance in lines 15-16 to be the final piece of information that needed to be conveyed. Although SON did not actually continue speaking, we can still deduce that 'right' in line 16 was intended as a continuer from the fact that EPH was uttering continuers in his previous turns, meaning that he was understanding the present activity as a telling by SON, and the long pause in line 19.

Similarity to the use of 'right' in third position appears in this extract as well. Line 01 consists of information-seeking question by EPH, followed by the relevant second pair part uttered by SON, the speaker with epistemic superiority. EPH's "Okay" in line 03 can be seen as a post-expansion signaling information receipt, and he makes a suggestion based on this information in the rest of his turn. Still, SON is the epistemic superior of the two regarding the current topic, and EPH remains in a position to listen to SON and receive information. This is what leads to the information-acknowledging continuer 'right' in line 18.

3.3.2. *Curtailed telling activity*

As is stated in Bolden et al. (2023), 'right' can be used to convey the speaker's epistemic access to the matter being discussed and that no further elaboration of the point is necessary. This can result in the closing down of a part of or the whole telling sequence. Such usages were identified in the data analyzed in the present study as well, and are exemplified in the two extracts provided in this section.

Extract 8: CallHome 4104 (2:21-2:36; replication of Extract 6)

- 01 A: So you might not come back here.
 02 (0.9)
 03 B: Ri:ght.
 04 A: Gotcha.
 05 B: See I'm only be there for like three or four
 06 days.
 07 (0.8)
 08 A: Right.
 09 B: So I mean if it's going to cost me an arm and
 10 a leg it's cheaper if I just stay here.
 11 A: **Right**. So you don't [nee-
 12 B: [Because] I don't have to do
 13 anything but work that day ['so.
 14 A: [**Right**.] Well wut
 15 happens to your work then?

The above extract is a replication of Extract 6 above, the only difference being that here, the 'right' tokens in lines 11 and 14 are highlighted. While I analyzed the 'right' in line 08 as a continuer forwarding the telling activity, here I analyze the 'right's in lines 11 and 14 as telling receipts that curtail the present telling. I argue that the 'right' token in line 08 and the 'right' tokens in lines 11 and 14 have distinct usages based on two pieces of evidence.

First, while the former follows a 0.8 second pause, no such pause is observable before line 11 or line 14. The pause in the former indicates that speaker A is waiting for speaker B to continue, and is only uttering 'right' to encourage him to go on when no such continuation happens. In contrast, there is no pause between B's utterance in lines 09-10 and A's utterance of 'right' in line 11. A's utterance of 'right' in line 14 even overlaps with B's previous utterance; although the 'right' is uttered at the end of a TCU ("I don't have to do anything but work that day" in lines 12-13), indicating that A perhaps did not mean to interrupt, her utterance nevertheless results in a slight disruption of B's utterance. This shows a disalignment with the continuation of B's current telling action.

Second, speaker A ends her turn after uttering 'right' in line 08, but continues after uttering right in lines 11 and 14. The former indicates that A has nothing more to contribute to the conversation at the moment. A's self-selection at the TRP after 'right' in line 11, on the other hand, indicates that A now has enough information about B's schedule to make her own inference about it. She proceeds to utter "So you don't nee-" which is probably the beginning of a

confirming statement or question which would have resulted in a shift of the topic at its completion. This is interrupted by B's utterance in line 12. A's overlap in line 14 with B's utterance in line 13 signals that the latter contributed little to A's epistemic state. In line 14, A goes on to ask "Well wut happens to your work then?"; this time successfully shifting the topic by proffering the new topic of B's work. Both tokens of 'right' in lines 11 and 14, followed by additional utterances that potentially could shift the topic of the conversation, are curtailers that cut short the present telling activity and urge the start of a new one.

The following extract is also an example of 'right' curtailing telling activity, characterized by a prominent interruption and ensuing silence.

Extract 9: CallHome 4247 (4:18-5:18)

- 01 A: Ano^ther thing that just came up was that the
 02 Supreme Court said that thee (.) u:m
 03 redistricting of the congressional districts,
 04 one of which is in Georgia, violated the
 05 Constitution because it was based primarily on
 06 (.) race. There was you know a [new-
 07 B: [What did] they do i- They were doing it
 08 because they were trying to make it more e-
 09 like they were trying to make it less
 10 segregated?
 11 A: ((inhale))They were trying to make the
 12 district (.) majority (.) black Americans so
 13 therefore they drew it (.) uh all the way
 14 across the state. You see what I'm [saying?
 15 B: [o:h]
 16 right. [uhhuh.
 17 A: [a-] a very narrow district and it
 18 created a majority black district which then
 19 elected, a- a black representative and then it
 20 was challenged because it said well the only
 21 reason that it's been done this way is just to
 22 ensure that it was. majority black ((inhale))
 23 and that'[s not-
 24 B: [Right.]
 25 (0.9)
 26 A: y' know.
 27 (4.1)

- 28 A: Hullo?
 29 (1.2)
 30 B: I'm he:re.

This extract is from the same conversation as Extract 3, with speaker A being an American living in his native country and speaker B being an American who has stayed abroad in recent years. Throughout the conversation, speaker A is in the position to inform speaker B on what is going on in the US, because he, as a US resident, has greater epistemic access over current events in the US.

Speaker A proffers the topic of a Supreme Court ruling concerning the formation of some congressional districts in lines 02-03. He explains the situation in lines 04-06, saying that the issue was that the districts were determined primarily based on race. At B's question about the purpose behind such a move, A mentions that it was to ensure that the majority of the district would consist of black Americans in lines 11-12. B shows her information receipt and comprehension in line 15-16, saying "o:h right. Uhhuh." Still, A repeats the phrase "majority black" (gray highlighted) twice more during his utterance in lines 17-23. After the third time she has heard the phrase "majority black", B interrupts A in the middle of his TCU to utter 'right' in line 24. This may be seen as a signal on B's part that B now has enough epistemic access as to the purpose of the problematic district formations, and no further elaboration is warranted.

B's utterance of 'right' in line 24 effectively stops A's telling activity, evidenced by the 0.9 second pause in line 25. After the pause, A utters "y' know" in line 26, adding no informational content, rather than properly concluding the interrupted TCU. The conversation comes to a halt when a 4.1 second pause follows in line 27. This long pause indicates that the whole telling activity has been cut down. We have evidence that this pause is not due to technical issues, as B indicates that she can still hear A by responding "I'm he:re" in line 30 to A's "Hullo?" in line 28. Although B starts out with inferior epistemic access to the topic in this excerpt, after three repetitions of the identical phrase "majority black", two of which came after B expressed her comprehension, B decides that she has heard enough about the present topic. This motivates her utterance of a curtailing 'right' in line 24. This cuts down the whole telling activity, and brings about an impasse in the conversation.

4. Discussion

As elaborated in the Introduction, Bolden et al. (2023) claim that the usage of the response particle ‘right’ differ in the US and the UK in terms of the expressed epistemic status of the speaker. According to them, ‘right’ is used in US English to confirm “my side” information, and such display of epistemic access can serve to curtail telling activity when used as telling receipt in a telling sequence. In UK English, on the other hand, ‘right’ can be used to register new information provided on the request of the speaker, and a connected usage is as a telling receipt that forwards telling activity.

In the present study, where I analyzed telephone conversation data in which all participants were native speakers of North American English, I was indeed able to find all usages of ‘right’ in US English as stated in Bolden et al. (2023). Section 3.1.1 in the present study corresponds to Bolden et al.’s Section 3.1, with an excerpt showing ‘right’ in second pair part to an information-seeking question. This ‘right’ is uttered by a speaker who has greater knowledge about the matter at hand, and confirms a piece of information as correct according to this knowledge. Section 3.3.2 in the present study corresponds to Bolden et al.’s Section 4.1, where we see instances of a part of a telling or an entire telling sequence being cut short after the utterance of ‘right’. This curtailing, as Bolden et al. explained, is the result of the ‘right’-speaker’s epistemic access to the matter at hand and the non-necessity of further elaboration. The present study on usages of ‘right’ in US English was thus able to identify all usage of ‘right’ identified as American in Bolden et al. (2023).

The major difference in the findings of the present study and that of Bolden et al. is that the former was able to find in the US data all usages labeled as British in the latter. Section 3.2 in the present study corresponds to Bolden et al.’s Section 3.2, where ‘right’ is used in post-expansion (third position) by a speaker who posed an information-seeking question in the first pair part and is now registering the information provided in the second pair part. Section 3.3.1 in the present study corresponds to Bolden et al.’s Section 4.2, whose excerpts show ‘right’ used as a telling-forwarding receipt indicating registration of information and acknowledgment of this information as meaningful to the conversation.

Moreover, I identified additional usages of ‘right’ not explicitly mentioned in Bolden et al. (2023) but share traits with usages labeled as British in the study. First, in Section 3.1.2, I provided an example in which ‘right’ is used as a

response a comprehension check to confirm information receipt. This ‘right’, although it appears in second pair part, is similar to the post-expansion (third position) usage (cf. Section 3.2) in that it is a response to new information, rather than confirmation of information that one already has.

Second, in Section 3.1.3, I demonstrated that ‘right’ can also be used to confirm that the speaker shares information to a comparable degree with the hearer. Although this usage is seen in cases where less informational asymmetry is present between the two participants, it is similar to the telling-forwarding receipt (continuer) usages (cf. Section 3.3.1) in that it serves to acknowledge the significance or adequacy of the provided information to the conversation, leading to a smooth continuation of the sequence.

Such sharp contrast between the findings of the present study and that of Bolden et al. (2023) naturally leads to questions as to why. One possible reason is regional differences within the US. For the present study, I examined only one conversation that was labelled as being from Southern US (CallFriend 6750; transcript not included) because it was the only instance of a standalone ‘right’ in the CallFriend Southern US dataset. This asymmetry in the frequency of ‘right’ in Northern and Southern US suggests that perhaps ‘right’ has different usages in the two regions as well. It could be the case that Bolden et al.’s data consisted of more Southern data than did the present study, which led to the different analysis. This argument loses some of its appeal, however, because of the fact that ‘right’ is used as a confirmation of shared knowledge in the CallFriend 6750 example, rather than confirmation of “my side” information or telling-curtailling receipt.

Another conjecture we may make is that temporal differences have led to these different findings. Bolden et al. (2023) state that their data were collected over a historical span starting from the 1970s and leading up to the present. The CABank datasets used in the present study, on the other hand, were recorded in the 1990s. It may be the case that while it was uncommon in US English in the 1970s-80s to use ‘right’ when having little epistemic access about the topic, from the 1990s on such a usage became more common in the US. More detailed information on the temporal distribution of the data used by Bolden et al. (2023) may shed light on this issue.

5. Conclusion

The present study was motivated by two observations regarding the extant CA literature on response particles. First, despite the intuitive familiarity of the response particle ‘right’, few CA studies had investigated its usage in detail. Second, one such study, Bolden et al. (2023), made claims about the dialectal differences between US and UK usages of ‘right’ that seemed to be contradicted by evidence gathered from preliminary exploration of CABank data. Specifically, while Bolden et al. claim that ‘right’ is used in US English by a speaker with higher epistemic access to the matter at hand, I was able to find instances where US English speakers use ‘right’ when in a position to request and receive information.

On these grounds, I analyzed conversations in the CallHome and CallFriend datasets within CABank, all of which involve native North American English speaker participants. Sequential analysis of standalone ‘right’s in these datasets allowed me to identify the following usages: confirmation of “my side” information; confirmation of new information receipt; confirmation of shared information; registering requested information; forwarding telling activity; and curtailing telling activity. Among these usages, ‘confirmation of “my side” information’ and ‘curtailing telling activity’ are ones employed by a speaker with high epistemic access to the topic at hand. The rest, ‘confirmation of new information receipt’, ‘confirmation of shared information’, ‘registering requested information’, and ‘forwarding telling activity’ are ones employed by a speaker with lesser or comparable epistemic access.

While I was able to confirm that all usages identified as American in Bolden et al. (2023) indeed appear in the North American data I examined, I also found that the usages labeled as British could be found in the data, and identified previously unmentioned usages as well. In other words, ‘right’ in US English can be used by a speaker at an informational inferiority or a speaker with knowledge level comparable to the other participant, as well as by a speaker with markedly greater epistemic access over the topic at hand. This finding, in stark contrast with the claim made by Bolden et al., is the main contribution of the present study. Further investigation on why this difference may be would deepen our understanding of ‘right’; it would also be interesting to re-investigate the usage of ‘right’ in UK English. These tasks I leave for future research.

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